

## **Fifty Shades of Romance: The intertextualities of *Fifty Shades of Grey***

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*Fifty Shades of Grey* was claimed at the time of its first appearance in 2011 as a new kind of publishing phenomenon, and as a new conjuncture of popular fiction and technology; a guilty pleasure that could be purchased and read in secret. The series was also widely acknowledged to be a product of digital technology; it had its genesis as a form of fan fiction on the internet, with the author E.L. James<sup>1</sup> writing a blog on the site FanFiction.net. It was originally written in 2009 as a tribute to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series of young adult novels, with the characters initially named after the *Twilight* hero and heroine, Edward Cullen and Bella Swan. It was self-published on James' own website<sup>2</sup>, then published by an Australian online publisher as an eBook and print-on-demand, and only published in hard copy by Vintage books in 2011; fifty per cent of the sales of *Fifty Shades* were made initially made through eBooks.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* is inarguably a publishing phenomenon. The first volume sold more than 70 million copies in 2012 and is the second most borrowed book in libraries in the UK ([www.bookmarkyourlibrary.org.uk](http://www.bookmarkyourlibrary.org.uk)). *Fifty Shades of Grey* was an immediate best-seller, as *The Bookseller* reported in 2015, it was at the top of the chart for e-Book sales, along with its sequels:

Amazon has released a list of its best-selling Kindle books over the last five years in the UK, with *Fifty Shades* writer E.L. James topping the e-book chart.

E.L. James' original *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Arrow) title was the best-selling e-book on the Amazon.co.uk platform (released April 2012) with her follow-up in the trilogy, *Fifty Shades Darker*, ranking second and the third instalment *Fifty Shades Freed* coming in fourth (Campbell, 2015)

The novel saved the fortunes of its publishing company, Random House (*The Guardian*, 26 March, 2013) and its author, E.L. James, became the first author to be crowned 'publishing person of the year' by *Publishers' Weekly* in 2012. These sales and recognition are in themselves reasons to investigate the series, but it is also important to address what kind of texts these novels are and how innovative they are in terms of both form and distribution.

Many commentators at the time of publication attributed the success of the series to its availability as a digital download, an erotic novel that could be read on a personal e-reader, without any cover

that could reveal the title and content. A review in *The Guardian* claimed the first volume as the product of a digital 'revolution':

*Fifty Shades of Grey* is the huge erotic breakout novel of the digital download revolution. The idea is that anyone can write on the internet, build their popularity, then get properly published and downloaded on to Kindles and Kobos, so no one has to sit on a train showing the world [what]they're reading' (Colgan, 2012).

Jayashree Kamblé has argued that digital technology in the twenty first century had had a significant effect on the ways in which fiction is consumed and suggested that it would have a major impact on traditional publishing practices:

. . . we now find ourselves in the most massive shift in the novel strand of the genre's DNA since the book itself became widely available as a paperback form . . . the genre is being true (or is it untrue?) to form and undergoing further change in response to the digital age. A great many of its adaptations will now stem from the influence of new technologies and upend established publishing houses and practices. As tablets and audio books make up growing share of the market, digital reading and listening are rapidly gaining ground and print-based publishing, some of whose agents exercised considerable editorial control over the genre, is under fire. (Kamblé, pp. 157-158)

Since this was written in 2009, the digital revolution in patterns of popular reading has proved less revolutionary than anticipated. In 2016, The Publishers' Association reported that the purchase of eBooks and ereaders had declined and that sales of hard copy fiction were on the rise:

The invoiced value of UK publisher total sales of physical and digital books rose 5.9% to £3.5bn in 2016, with a 7.6% increase in physical book sales and a 2.8% decrease in digital book sales. Digital book sales now account for 15% of UK publishers' total digital and physical book sales, down from 17% in 2014 and 2015 (The Publishers Association, 2016).

*Fifty Shades of Grey* might initially appear to be an innovation in popular publishing for a woman readership; with its origins on the internet, its global success, its notorious appeal to an older woman demographic, its distribution through supermarkets and eBooks, and through its clearly erotic content for a female readership. All these factors have, however, long been understood in the marketing and generic expectations of the Harlequin romance novel.

Publishers of romance fiction understood, long before the digital revolution, the importance for women of purchasing and reading romance fiction in private. Harlequin, Silhouette and Mills and Boon (through the Rose of Romance Book Club) titles had been largely sold, since the 1970s, through a postal subscription service, and (as was *Fifty Shades of Grey*) in supermarkets. Romance publishers were not slow in capitalising on the potential of eBooks and digital technology either; Mills and Boon incorporated an eBook subscription service into their sales strategy from 2008, Harlequin have sold Kindle versions of their books since 2007 and now publish in every format, Silhouette has offered eBooks since 2007. Each of these brands is so confident that their product has such 'Romantic,

liberating and totally addictive' qualities (as the back cover claims for *Fifty Shades of Grey*) that they offer eBook buyers free novels to introduce them to their lists.

In 1990 I wrote an article on the Mills and Boon romance (Philips, 1990) which suggested that generic romance fiction, then the bestselling novels in the world, could not be understood as simply escapist fantasy, but that they addressed gender divisions and tensions that were real experiences for women. The narratives then had a recurrent narrative trope; the hero was immediately identifiable as the figure that the heroine mistrusted, his behaviour towards the heroine was dismissive, and he appeared to be insensitive and hurtful. It was in the final pages that the reader and the heroine discover his kinder, gentler side, as he reveals his love for the heroine (and the often widely implausible) reasons for his denigration of the heroine. Although the company have repeatedly denied that there is any formula for their romances, Mills and Boon then issued guidelines for potential authors (a more recent version is now available online) that clearly outlined the conventions of plot line and character. According to Mills and Boon, the template for a hero was then that: '... the hero is meant to be a man of authority used to being obeyed, he should be shown as such and the other characters should react to him accordingly' (Mills and Boon editorial leaflet, 1990).

The American publishing company Silhouette (owned, since 2007, by Harlequin Enterprises<sup>3</sup>), which published very similar novels and exchanged titles with Mills and Boon, were, in the same year, more expansive in their definitions of what a hero and heroine should be:

The Hero: Older arrogant, self-assured, masterful, hot tempered, he is capable of violence, passion and tenderness . . . He is always older than the heroine, rich, successful in the vocation of his choice . . . he is above all virile.

The Silhouette heroine is young 18-24 . . . She is almost always a virgin . . . She is usually without parents or a 'protective' relationship . . . She is starting a career, leaving college . . . anyway, she's open to change, and accepts adventure, though often not by choice' (Silhouette editorial leaflet, 1990)

It might be thought that, nearly three decades later, the categorisation of romantic masculinity and femininity and the relationship between them might since have changed, but the current online guidelines for the required features of the Harlequin 'Desire' imprint (which publishes the more sexually explicit titles) differ very little from those of 1990 in their expectations of what characterises a hero and heroine; as the description of the 'Desire' series demonstrates:

**Featured in Harlequin Desire:**

A powerful and wealthy hero—an alpha male with a sense of entitlement, and sometimes arrogance. Beneath his alpha exterior, he displays vulnerability, and he is capable of being saved by the heroine. The Harlequin Desire hero often has fewer scenes from his point of view, but in many ways, he owns the story. Readers should want to fall in love with and rescue the Harlequin Desire hero themselves!

The Harlequin Desire heroine knows who she is and what she wants. She is complex and can be vulnerable herself. She is strong-willed and smart, though capable of making mistakes when it comes to matters of the heart. The heroine is equally as important as the hero, if not more so . . .

Harlequin Desire stories should take place against the dramatic backdrop of wealthy settings and sweeping family saga. (Harlequin, 2019).

Christian Grey is undeniably an 'alpha male', the most powerful figure in the novel. Anastasia is at a stage of transition in her life; she is young, a student about to leave college, and a virgin, all qualities which mark the heroine of the standard romance plot. The narrative drive of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, across all the volumes, is concerned with the 'handsome', 'strong' Christian, and his relationship with the 'smart' Anastasia. His office and apartment have all the accoutrements of a 'wealthy setting' and as the saga unfolds, a 'sweeping family saga' emerges.

The Harlequin criteria for setting, character and plot are all accommodated in the volumes of the *Fifty Shades* series. The narrative structure also conforms entirely to Tania Modleski's 1982 account of the formula for the Harlequin romance:

. . . the formula rarely varies: a young, inexperienced, poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced wealthy man . . . The heroine is confused by the hero's behaviour since, though he is obviously interested in her, he is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile and even somewhat brutal. (Modleski, p. 36)

Christian's predilection for sado-masochism derives, it is eventually revealed, from a damaged childhood, and both Anastasia and the reader come to understand his vulnerability. He is an example of what Kamblé has termed the 'Damaged Romance Novel Hero', damaged not by war wounds as in a historical romance, but through psychological damage from the domestic family. He also conforms to Kamblé's definition of 'the popular model for the romantic hero – one possessing a *capitalist* identity . . . the masculine ideal of the businessman . . . evolved from one standing in for market capitalism to one representing multinational capitalism' (Kamblé, p. 32).

Anastasia describes Christian as a 'mega-industrialist tycoon . . . the enigmatic CEO of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc . . . and exceptional entrepreneur' (James, p.3); James' original title for her online novel was *Master of the Universe* (Downey, p. 112) <sup>4</sup>.

In the first volume of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Anastasia meets Christian as a student, he is the notable billionaire who presents her with her degree. From the first mention of Christian Grey it is made

clear that he is 'a man of authority used to being obeyed' as the Harlequin guidelines would expect. Anastasia is suitably deferential: '... his time is extraordinarily precious - much more precious than mine' (James, p.3). In this imbalance of social status and experience there is more than a suggestion of a power relationship that can easily shift into the sado-masochism that has given *Fifty Shades of Grey* its notoriety. That sadism is not a new phenomenon for the romance novel either; a group from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies argued from their readings of Mills and Boon romances in 1985:

The desire that romance structures . . . is exclusively heterosexual, patriarchal, sado-masochistic. By sado-masochistic heterosexuality we mean the form of sexual relationship between men and women – the dominant one in our society – in which pleasure is the result of masculine activity and feminine dependence and passivity. (Batsleer et al. p. 99)

The group's description of the relationship between hero and heroine in Barbara Cartland's novels of the period is equally applicable to that of Anastasia and Christian: 'The man is the teacher, the woman his willing pupil' (Batsleer et al. p. 100). Anastasia is not only a college student, but she is also inducted by Christian into the cultural and erotic sophistications of his lifestyle.

Anastasia is, as in Modleski's description and in keeping with the Harlequin guidelines, young, inexperienced and relatively impoverished (she is working in a hardware store at the beginning of the novel). Her first person narrative<sup>5</sup> is self-deprecating, she 'scowls at herself in the mirror . . . trying to brush my hair into submission (James, P. 3). Her wayward hair is a recurrent trope throughout the novel, a signifier of her 'natural' beauty (and possibly of her openness to sexual adventure) that distinguishes her from the glossy and polished blonde women she encounters at Christian's office, and who threaten to be her rivals for his attentions. Like Jane Eyre, Anastasia underestimates the power of her own attractiveness, describing herself as 'mousy Ana Steele'. The reader however is rapidly disabused of this description; Anastasia is provided with two admiring men and a friend who describes her as a 'total babe'.

Rosalind Coward noted in 1984: 'Attractive, desirable men in these kinds of fantasies are required to be 'charismatic' . . . to have certain socially agreed characteristics - power, dominance and social recognition' (Coward, p. 191). As soon as Anastasia enters the phallic towers of Grey House - 'enormous - and frankly intimidating' (James, p.4), she is made fully aware that Christian is 'charismatic', that he has 'power and social recognition'. It is clear from Anastasia's visit to his office that Christian is 'used to being obeyed', as she observes his secretaries responding to his every requirement. In the conventions of a classic romance encounter of hero and heroine, Anastasia's first perception of Christian is that he is: 'arrogant, and for all his impeccable manners, he's

autocratic and cold' (James, p.17). He produces an 'irrational' reaction in her (a reaction that the reader familiar with romance conventions will recognise as sexual attraction), while his social power and status clearly mark him as the 'alpha male' of the Harlequin requirements. Christian is, also however, as with all romance heroes, repeatedly constructed as 'unreadable'. He is described as 'deadpan', 'private', 'cool', 'impassive', 'intimidating' and 'self-possessed', his enigmatic silence a challenge for Anastasia. Both the heroine and the reader are required to discover the vulnerability behind the 'arrogance', to break down the 'self-possession' and to break through his silence.

Modleski has described this dynamic as a central element in the pleasure of the genre romance:

In both Harlequins and Gothics, the heroines engage in a continual deciphering of the motives for the hero's behaviour. The Harlequin heroine probes for the secret underlying the masculine enigma, while the reader outwits the heroine in coming up with the 'correct' interpretation of the puzzling actions and attitudes of the man. (Modleski, p. 34)

Coward has argued that the required attributes of the hero of the romance are precisely those of the patriarchy: 'The qualities desired are age, power, detachment, the control of other people's welfare. And the novels never really admit any criticism of this power . . . what attracted (the heroine) . . . in the first place (are) precisely all the attributes of the unreconstructed patriarch' (Coward, p. 192). It is the heroine's mission to reconstruct this 'unreconstructed patriarch' and to render him a worthy partner and husband. The current Harlequin guidelines require 'dynamic heroines who want love - and more! (www.harlequin.com, 2019)'; 'more' is what Anastasia repeatedly asks of Christian, and that is initially what he cannot give. It takes Anastasia three volumes to understand the 'unfathomable emotion' that she identifies at their first meeting and to tame him. Coward identifies this as a fantasy in which the heroine 'alone has kindled the overwhelming desire that is going to end in marriage' (Coward, p. 193). Anastasia is repeatedly told throughout the narrative that it is only she who has evoked such emotions in Christian. Christian is, as readers of Harlequin, Silhouette and Mills and Boon will recognise, a damaged man, who needs the love of a good woman.

The triumph of Anastasia is the 'orgasmic kiss' (in Germaine Greer's phrase) that rewards every romance heroine for her patience and fortitude, the succumbing of the powerful hero, the revelation that he cannot live without her, that she alone is the one to 'bring him into the light', as Anastasia phrases it. This is, as Coward and Modleski have both pointed out, an infantile fantasy, in which the heroine concedes all power to the hero. It is the heroine's 'innocence' and 'natural femininity' that are seen to achieve the domestication of the alpha-male. Anastasia is repeatedly described as 'mystified', as 'in a daze', her role is both to decipher Christian's inscrutable masculinity (his fifty shades) and to make him speak the language of love, romance and commitment; to make him finally speak in the language of the novel.

Anastasia is emphatically a student of English Literature (although we never know her degree result and she does not discuss her studies); she is able to recognise a first edition of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and, rather disconcertingly, identifies with Tess. The narrative across the volumes of *Fifty Shades of Grey* offers the enigma of whether Christian should be characterised as the wicked seducer Alec D'Urberville, or the object of Tess's love, Angel Clare (E.L. James conveniently brushes over the fact that Angel in the novel is not without his own hypocrisies and that his treatment of Tess is unforgiving). The ingénue Anastasia's induction into her lover's lifestyle and sexual tastes also has literary precedents, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748) is concerned with a vulnerable young woman's initiation into sexual experience by a powerful, wealthy man, as are both Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748). Terry Eagleton has pointed to the analogies between Richardson's bestselling novel *Pamela*<sup>6</sup> and the popular genre romance, in terms which can also be applied to *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

Pamela tells the story of a woman snatched into the ruling class and tamed to its sexist disciplines; yet it contains, grotesque though it may sound, a utopian element. The novel is a kind of fairy-tale pre-run of *Clarissa*, a fantasy wish fulfilment in which abduction and imprisonment turn out miraculously well, the rough beast becomes a prince charming and the poor kitchen maid a beautiful princess (Eagleton, p. 55)

Anastasia may be an impoverished student, rather than a kitchen maid (and she does not suffer Clarissa's fate), but the narrative trajectory of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series can be seen as very similar to that of *Pamela*. Anastasia, like Pamela, is made to sign a contract and in the final volume, Anastasia's love and understanding have tamed Christian into a loving husband and father.

Christian as hero is also a familiar literary trope: he is the demon lover, described as both a 'dark knight' and 'devilish'. This is analogous to another glowering and dangerous hero, the enigmatic Edward Cullen, the vampire with a dark family history in that other multi-million dollar women's fiction phenomenon of the twenty first century, the *Twilight* saga. If Edward was the immediate inspiration for Christian, the demon lover has a long literary heritage that dates back to at least Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797). Edward Cullen and Christian Grey also share characteristics with the more contemporary vampire hero Lestat de Lioncourt of Anne Rice's bestselling series *The Vampire Chronicle*, published from 1976.

Deborah Lutz has identified the 'demon lover or villain who becomes the hero' (Lutz, p. 89) as an essential element of the 'new' Gothic genre. Her essay predates the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but her description of the demon lover precisely fits Christian Grey: 'the tormented, self-exiled man who lashes out in his pain and whose spiritual homelessness can only be appeased by the heroine' (Lutz p. 89). While this description is applicable both to the exiled, dangerous vampire Edward, and to the psychically damaged Christian, it is also true of the hero in the

domestic romance novel. The demon lover is such an essential element in the classic romance that he is embodied by two of the standard types of hero offered in the Harlequin guidelines: '**Alpha hero**: A hero in a position of power and used to getting his own way' and '**Bad Boys**: Heroes who might be a little rough around the edges or have a dark secret in their pasts.' (www.harlequin.com. 2019). Christian Grey conforms to both these types.

The literary precedents for the 'Alpha hero' can be followed through from the Mr B. of Richardson's *Pamela* to Jane Austen's Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (all texts and characters that are regularly referenced in romance fiction). James himself has maintained that 'the inspiration for the book was Beauty and the Beast, *Pretty Woman* and Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*' (quoted in Downey, p. 113). A scene in which Anastasia is left alone in Christian's apartment with the ability to choose at her pleasure from a boundless wardrobe and cuisine has distinct resonances of Beauty and the Beast, Christian's dungeon has echoes of Bluebeard's chamber, while his increasingly generous gifts are evocative of Richard Gere's character, the millionaire Edward, and his largesse in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* does suggest that the romance narrative of a final male submission to the charm of love is an affirmation of female power; in negotiating the literal contract of his relationship with Anastasia, Christian states that it is Anastasia (the 'submissive') who holds all the power in their sado-masochistic relationship: 'What I think you fail to realize is that in Dom/sub relationships it is the sub who has all the power. That's you. I'll repeat this - you are the one with all the power. Not I.' (James, p. 400). However, the power relations are heavily loaded, both in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and in the regulations of the popular romance. The hero is powerful, the heroine vulnerable. Although Anastasia does challenge (mildly) Christian's 'arrogance' - it is he who holds all the cards; he is the object of her desire, he is both socially and economically in a much stronger position than she. Christian is yet another manifestation of the dominant, powerful male. As Coward explains:

The qualities which make these men so desirable are, actually, the qualities which feminists have chosen to ridicule: power (the desire to dominate others); privilege (the exploitation of others); emotional distance (the inability to communicate); and singular love for the heroine (the inability to relate to anyone other than the sexual partner). (Coward, p. 192)

Anastasia does not choose to ridicule these qualities, and it is clear that neither is the reader expected to find them anything other but fascinating.

Romance is a genre that happily engages in hybridity with other generic narratives; while readers and librarians are well aware that the 'romance novel' is not a homogenous phenomenon, many



critics tend not to recognise the range of sub-genres within the classification of 'romance'.

Harlequin's website currently outline over twenty categories of romance under the Harlequin and Silhouette brands ; these currently include: the Medical, Historical Undone, Mystery, American, 'Superromance', Heart-warming, Romantic Suspense and 'Silhouette Desire (www.Harlequin.com)

Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels conform to the requirements of the Silhouette 'Nocturne' series<sup>7</sup> which bring together the Gothic supernatural with Romance, in the description on the Harlequin website: 'Harlequin Nocturne stories delve into dark, sensuous and often dangerous territory, where the normal and paranormal collide' (www.Harlequin.com). The narrative drive of the *Twilight* saga is the perpetually postponed consummation of an all-consuming romance between an innocent virgin and an enigmatic man with a sinister history. The relationship between the virginal Anastasia and the dominant (in all senses of the word) Christian in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not much of a step beyond the agonies of the teenage relationship articulated in the *Twilight* novels. The *Twilight* series is not itself far removed from the classic romance plot in its perpetual deferral of the consummation of female desire; it is Edward's status as a vampire that narratively justifies this deferral over four volumes. Silhouette made it clear that in 1990 that in a classic romance: 'The only pain permitted is the sweet pain of unfulfilled desire' (quoted in Philips. p. 144). Anastasia suffers less pain from Christian's sado-masochistic practices than she does from his inability to state his love for her, and that is a pain that James manages to sustain over the course of three volumes.

*Twilight* itself emerged out of a revival in the Gothic romance in American popular publishing, which Deborah Lutz identifies as dating from the late 1990s and early twenty first century, a period which saw romance publishers developing specialist Gothic imprints:

. . . the new Gothic romance dates to around 2001 when Dorchester publishing started its 'Candleglow' Gothic series, the second series since the mid 1970s to follow closely the rules of the Gothic. There was also a line of Gothics in the 1990s put out by Zebra . . . (and) has become a central theme on television with shows like 'Medium' 'Supernatural'; and 'Ghost Whisperer' ( Lutz, p. 82)

Stephenie Meyer however will not acknowledge that her work conforms to any genre, nor does she recognise any influences. Like Mary Shelley's description of the origin of *Frankenstein*, Meyer has said that the saga of the virginal Bella and the brooding vampire Edward Cullen came to her in a dream, a claim that, as with Shelley, is disingenuous in its denial of any conscious agenda. Meyer is a committed Mormon, and the deferral of any sexual act between Bella and Edward until the sanctity of marriage could not but have distinct moral connotations in the America of Bush and the rise of

the Tea Party, the context in which the saga was written. Meyer has also denied that there is any relationship between her fiction and romance publishing, she has said that the traditional romance is too erotic for her, as she stated in an interview: 'Erotica is not something I read. I don't even read traditional romance . . . It's too smutty. There's a reason my books have a lot of innocence. That's the sort of world I live in.' (Meyer, quoted in Cochrane, p.9). Again, this is disingenuous; it is widely known that Mills and Boon, Silhouette and Harlequin 'traditional' romances do not allow for consummation without at least a promise of marriage.

Meyer's understanding of what constitutes 'True Romance' has distinct echoes of both *Fifty Shades of Grey* and a traditional romance plot line; for Meyer, love requires that the heroine subsumes herself entirely in love for her partner: 'To me, true love is that you would hurt yourself before you would hurt your partner, you would do anything to make them happy, even at your own expense, there's nothing selfish about true love. It's not about what you want. It's about what makes them happy.' (Meyer quoted in Cochrane, p. 9) The interviewer, Kira Cochrane, noted the extent to which the plot lines and characterisations of the *Twilight* novels echo those of the classic popular romance, as she remarks: 'There must be tens of thousands of romance novels containing similar themes and biases to Meyer's series: weak heroines, strong heroes, submission and surrender, a central plot involving obsessive love' (Cochran, p. 9). Indeed there are; the 'Goodreads' website has a distinct category dedicated to 'Popular Obsessive Love books ([www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com))

What appeared to mark the *Fifty Shades* series out as different from the 'classic romance' was its explicit eroticism. It remains a generic boundary in the traditional romance novel that sex cannot happen outside the sanctity of marriage (or at least the promise of marriage); allowing for sexual explicitness required a whole new genre, which both Silhouette and Mills and Boon developed in 1985; Mills and Boon with the 'Desire' category, Silhouette with 'Temptation'. 'Mills and Boon' remains a euphemism for coy sexuality, but its readers and publishers have long passed the point of requiring the heroines to remain virginal.

Janice Radway, writing in 1984, was clear then that the popular romance provided erotic pleasures, however coyly expressed these might be, and argued that the narrative pleasure depended upon the reader's sexual anticipation:

. . . for even the most euphemistic description of the heroine's reception of his (the hero's) regard convey the sensual, corporal pleasure she feels in anticipating, encouraging, and finally accepting those attentions of a hero who is always depicted as magnetic, powerful and

physically pleasing . . . In effect, romance reading provides a vicarious experience of emotional nurturance *and* erotic anticipation and excitement. (Radway, p. 105)

For all their claims to the erotic and the mysterious, both the *Twilight* and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series embrace the conventional romance resolution of marriage. The plot and characterisations of *Fifty Shades of Grey* are entirely familiar to readers of Mills and Boon, Silhouette and Harlequin romances. As titles from Harlequin, Silhouette and Mills and Boon dating back to the 1960s indicate, this plot is a well-trodden path. A standard plot is one in which, as in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, an innocent and virginal (but strangely attractive) young woman meets a powerful and damaged man, finds him challenging and enigmatic, and through her patience is rewarded with love and marriage.

The deep structure of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a 'classic' Harlequin romance, beyond the 'room of pain' and the erotica, the hermeneutic is, as in all romance fiction, whether the heroine can achieve 'a relationship' with a dominant man. As Anastasia Steele herself articulates, the bondage, domination and sado-masochistic elements of her relationship with Christian are not for her (or, by implication, the reader) the main event, it is 'love' that really matters: 'The BDSM is a distraction from the real issue. The sex is amazing, he's wealthy, he's beautiful, but this is all meaningless without his love, and the real heart fail is that I don't know if he's capable of love. (James, p. 472)'.

James herself has commented that the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* owes less to its erotic scenes than it does to the emphasis on romance; her own account of her narrative is close to Modleski's and Coward's analyses of the Harlequin and Mills and Boon romance:

The love story is so much more important than the sex. The sex is interesting but loads of books have sex in . . . You want to know: What is going to happen to these two people? Will she break him down in the end? Because of course, she's far stronger than he is. (E.L. James quoted in Cooke, p.13)

It is now publishing mythology that James began writing her novels as a form of fan fiction on the internet, as an erotic tribute to the *Twilight* series. Paul Booth has suggested that online fan sites have enabled fans to go beyond consumption and to become producers of fiction and argues that *Fifty Shades of Grey* was a consequence of a new dynamic between readers and publishers:

From the perspective of the media industries, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was a success: it . . . incentivized a new pool of fan authors for monetization. This success could indicate that consumptive fan play with the media is morphing into productive media work, as fans are becoming producers . . . (Booth, p.10)

However, Mills and Boon had already long recognised that it was the consumers of their fiction who were in a strong position to become producers themselves. Mills and Boon editors stated in 1990 'You cannot develop a love of writing them (Mills and Boon novels) if you have not loved reading them' (quoted in Philips, p. 142). E. L James and her inspiration Stephenie Meyer can be understood as what Nick Couldry has termed 'Writer Gatherers' (Couldry, p. 139); Couldry is here describing the gathering of news, but it is a term that is useful for understanding the ways in which successful popular fictions gather together forms, narratives, and character types in a patchwork of intertextuality, an intertextuality which, as Couldry has argued, is magnified by the web. In the case of romance fiction, that intertextuality is also rooted in a familiarity with the conventions of the genre.

If *Fifty Shades of Grey* is most directly indebted to Meyer's *Twilight* series it also owes much to the classic genre romance; as Downey has pointed out:

. . . the series is the direct inheritor of the twentieth-century 'romance' novels for and about women discussed by Tania Modleski and Janice Radway.

. . . the very adaptability of this basic plot structure and the overwhelming popularity of the *Fifty Shades* franchise as a cultural phenomenon imply that, while we may like to imagine that gender politics have evolved, the Cinderella/Bluebeard dyad still has much to tell us about ourselves. (Downey, pp. 119-120)

While *Fifty Shades of Grey* derives most directly from the classic domestic romance and the gothic novel, there are at least fifty shades of other popular fictional forms in its mix. Although Yuha Kiuchi has stated that 'From the genre perspective the books are just the combination of the romance and vampire fiction' (Kiuchi, p. 3), the narrative offers a web of intertextuality. *Fifty Shades of Grey* has echoes of familiar fairy tales, most clearly in the 'Cinderella' transformation of Anastasia from student to billionaire's consort, and also of 'Beauty and the Beast', as James has acknowledged. The first volume also has all the accoutrements of the sex and shopping novel of the 1980s, Christian only drinks 'delicious' Chablis and Sancerre, he gives Anastasia a top of the range Mac lap top and Thomas Hardy first editions, his flat is 'impeccably' designed, and hung with 'exquisite' works of art. As in many Harlequin and Silhouette romances, there are often unintentionally comic moments in the narrative while the erotic charge is suspended while the

heroine admires soft furnishings and table settings, as when Anastasia visits the house of Christian's family, where she is suitably impressed by the menu and interior décor.

In the second volume of the series, *Fifty Shades Darker*, there are distinct shades of Virginia Woolf's Gothic family saga of childhood abuse *Flowers in the Attic* (another novel which went on to become a series), in its use of the italicized first person child confessional and the gradual revelation of Christian's childhood trauma. This second novel which follows Anastasia as a (semi) single woman in Seattle also owes something to the Chick Lit genre. The trilogy (and its sequel, *Grey: Fifty Shades of Grey as Told by Christian*, told from Christian's point of view, published in 2015) has become notorious for its eroticism and use of sado-masochism, a notoriety which owes something to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (who gave his name to Christian's sexual proclivity) and his 1870 *Venus in Furs* and also to the French 1954 novel *Story of O*, published under the pseudonym Pauline Réage.

In 1990 I argued of the contemporary popular romance novel that 'the conventions of the form have been internalised to such an extent by both authors and editors that they are no longer acknowledged as such; they are simply assumed' (Philips, 1990, p. 142). By 2012, the conventions of the popular romance had become so familiar that most contemporary critics of *Fifty Shades of Grey* no longer recognised them at all - the reviews and commentaries made no reference to the familiarity of the characterisations or to the recurrent tropes in the novels that derive from romance fiction.

In their 1982 essay on gender and genre, the Birmingham group argued that romance novels represent gender relations and their historical shifts:

The power of these fictions is directly related to their ability to represent structural features of the position women in relation to men. And just as that position both changes *and* exhibits deeply persistent features, so too do romantic fictions show elements of change and of profound continuity. (Batsleer et al., p. 88)

The 'profound continuity' is clearly there not only in the characterisations and conventions of *Fifty Shades of Grey* but in its constructions of contemporary masculinity and femininity and in its affirmation of a heterosexual relationship which is predicated on the literal domination of a man over a woman. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for all its apparent modernity, does not challenge those 'structural features' at all, but reproduces them unchanged. The trilogy is shocking, not because of its eroticism or in its use of sado-masochism, but because it is an extended narrative that continues

to work with characterisations of masculinity and femininity, and with plot conventions that were in place, and recognised by feminist critics, over three decades ago.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> E.L James is a pseudonym for Erika Mitchell

<sup>2</sup> 50Shades.com

<sup>3</sup> The merger of Silhouette, Harlequin and Mills and Boon makes Harlequin Enterprises the largest publisher of romance fiction in the world.

<sup>4</sup> This early version of the novel used the names of the characters in the *Twilight* series, and was published as a stand alone title in 2013

<sup>5</sup> This is a break from the conventions of the Silhouette, Mills and Boon and Harlequin romance, which are almost always written in the third person

<sup>6</sup> *Clarissa* is also cited by Q.D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* and Rosalind Coward's *Female Desire*, among others, as a precedent for the romance genre

<sup>7</sup> The Nocturne series was discontinued by Harlequin in 2017, but was later reinstated, this may have something to do with the success of the *Twilight* novels